

Making Monsters: Lady Gaga, Fan Identification, and Social Media

Melissa A. Click, Hyunji Lee & Holly Willson Holladay

Like her chart-breaking musical success, Lady Gaga's relationship with fans, built by her messages of self-acceptance and by her intense engagement with fans through social media, is unprecedented. Through one-on-one interviews with an international sample of 45 self-described Little Monsters, we explored this unusual fan-celebrity relationship and found that Lady Gaga's re-articulation of the negative connotations of "monster" enabled fans to use her as a mirror to reflect upon and embrace their differences from mainstream culture. We argue that social media amplify fan identification and raise questions about the changing nature of fan-celebrity relationships in a digital environment.

In 2008, Lady Gaga made a striking entry into the pop music scene. With her album, *The Fame*, she became the first artist to produce five number one hits on *Billboard's* Pop Songs chart from a debut album (Wolk). Lady Gaga also grabbed the pop spotlight with her outrageous persona, built from an eclectic collection of characteristics, including unpredictable theatricality, avant-garde fashion, gender-bending performance, and GLBTQ activism. The Italian-American star, born Stefani Joanne Angelina Germanotta, maintains her public image with a team of stylists, designers, producers, and choreographers she calls the "Haus of Gaga." Referencing her larger-than-life persona, Gaga claims, "my whole life is a performance. . . . I have to up the ante every day" (qtd in Stein and Michelson 109). Lady Gaga's subsequent musical releases, *The Fame Monster* and *Born This Way*, which followed in November 2009 and May 2011 respectively, definitely upped the ante. For example, the title song from *Born This Way*, released in February 2011, quickly topped the charts in 23 countries, became *Billboard's* 1,000th number one hit, and set an iTunes record for selling one million copies in five days (Powell). To date, Lady Gaga has sold 16.5 million albums and 29.5 million digital singles, which helped to put her in the number one position of *Forbes'* 2011 Celebrity 100 index, which measures both fame and wealth (Goudreau; Greenblatt, Pastorek, and Stack).

As illustrated by her record-breaking following on Facebook (57 million fans as of May 2013), Twitter (37 million followers as of May 2013), and YouTube (1.2 billion

views), Lady Gaga has cultivated a large, lively, and loyal following (Dunne; Greenblatt, Pastorek, and Stack). She is widely recognized as a pioneer for her use of online and social media to publicize her work and connect with fans, and her online presence has enabled her to forge “a reciprocal relationship with her acolytes unlike that of any other pop-music icon” (Wolk). In March 2012, Gaga launched an invite-only social networking site for her fans, LittleMonsters.com. On the site, users can download Gaga’s music, buy tickets for her shows, communicate with each other, and, on occasion, talk to Lady Gaga herself (“Little Monster Mash”).

Gaga’s brief Twitter bio (“Mother Monster”) efficiently sums up her relationship with fans: she is both a maternal safe haven and an eccentric symbol drawing on the current cultural preoccupation with the monstrous. Unlike contemporaries who use sex appeal to create desire in their audiences, Gaga emphasizes her oddities to give shelter, support, and solidarity to her fans, who call themselves “Little Monsters.” She encourages them to “use me as an escape. . . . I am the excuse to explore your identity. To be exactly who you are and to feel unafraid. To not judge yourself, to not hate yourself” (qtd in Van Meter). Her messages about appearance, gender, and sexuality have struck a chord with fans, who identify with her history of being bullied in school for being different (Setoodeh). They use her song “Born This Way” as a rallying cry and answer her calls for “Paws Up” with a physical expression of solidarity—outstretched arms and fingers bent and curled to resemble monster claws.

Gaga also publicly champions fans’ creative work, links to fan images and videos through social media, and appears in fan-designed clothing (Hiatt). Additionally, she works to expose the mistreatment that Little Monsters privately endure. For example, at a September 2011 performance, Gaga played a photomontage of a 14-year-old Little Monster, Jamey Rodemeyer, who had recently committed suicide after relentless bullying over his sexual identity; he was reportedly buried in his “Born This Way” t-shirt (Grindley). In February 2012, Gaga launched the Born This Way Foundation, a joint venture with Harvard University, that, according to its mission statement, will “foster a more accepting society, where differences are embraced and individuality is celebrated” (Dumenico).

Like her chart-breaking musical success, Lady Gaga’s relationship with fans, built in equal parts by her messages of empowerment and self-acceptance and by her intense engagement with fans through social media, is unparalleled. To explore the unusual relationship she has cultivated with her fans, we conducted one-on-one interviews with an international sample of 45 self-described Little Monsters. In particular, we examined how fans articulate their identification with the label “Little Monsters,” characterize their own monstrosities, and relate to Lady Gaga as Mother Monster. We also considered the role Gaga’s extraordinary reciprocity, enabled by social media, plays in the maintenance of the relationship between Mother and Little Monsters. We begin with a review of the scholarship that framed our analysis.

Relevant Literature

To make sense of the complexities of the relationship between Lady Gaga and her fans, we draw from three relatively disparate areas of research: fan identification, monsters and the monstrous, and celebrity in social media. Though each area is distinct, the three become fused in this project through our exploration of the relationships Little Monsters have developed with Lady Gaga. To begin, we discuss research on fans' identification with fan objects.

Fan Identification

Though much has been written about what fans like about and what fans do with their fan objects, relatively little has been written about intrapersonal or psychological relationships with fan objects (Caughey; Cavicchi; Fraser and Brown; Sandvoss). To make sense of why and how Little Monsters identify with Lady Gaga, we relied upon the few qualitative studies that have engaged questions about the processes through which fans identify. Donald Horton and Richard Wohl argue that media texts encourage members of their audience to develop "parasocial" relationships, which give an illusion of a "seeming face-to-face relationship" with media performers (216). John Caughey extends Horton and Wohl's conceptualization of "parasocial interaction," and argues that scholarship exploring the motivations driving social interactions has ignored imaginary social relationships. He asserts that researchers should apply ethnographic methods to imaginary relationships because "like actual social worlds, imaginary worlds are *social* worlds" (29, emphasis in original). Further, Caughey suggests that conduct in imaginary worlds has significant impact on actual social interaction. He supports his arguments with reference to ethnographic studies of three different kinds of imaginary relationships, including fans' relationships with media figures.

Like Horton and Wohl, Caughey asserts that imaginary relationships with media figures, including celebrities, are encouraged by the media industries, which "lavish considerable effort on techniques that not only invite but virtually force this kind of identification" (39). Of the kinds of imaginary relationships with media figures that Caughey describes, he highlights one particular type that he finds to be "more common and significant" (53), in which fans display "intense admiration" (53) for a media figure. Caughey suggests that fans often describe such a relationship by comparing it to an actual social relationship: "They speak of their hero as a 'friend,' 'older sister,' 'father figure,' 'guide' or 'mentor'" (53). Such relationships can be compensation or substitutes for dissatisfying actual experiences (49) and/or function as "an ideal self-image" (54) the fan wishes to develop. Caughey explains that identification with a media figure may form initially through actual social relationships (e.g. one listens to a star's music because a friend does), but then develops emotional and patterned behaviors, including intense and repeated media consumption, collecting, and fantasizing (55–56). Over time, fans identify more

deeply and incorporate “the media figure’s values and plans” (59) into their own attitudes and behaviors. Although the intense identification developed in imaginary relationships is frequently pathologized, Caughey stresses that such relationships can, and do, have important individual and social benefits, ranging from self-reflection to the adoption of pro-social values and behaviors (66–67).

Cornel Sandvoss focuses exclusively on the psychological relationship between fans and fan objects, arguing that “[t]o fully understand fandom and the relationship between fan and object of fandom, we thus have to understand the psychological foundations of the self” (68). He shakes up the regular fan studies’ practice of drawing social and cultural conclusions by finding connections between fans’ socio-demographic positions, readings, and practices. Instead, he asserts that fan studies should move beyond the idea that the connection between fans and fan objects is “a mere possessive relationship” (163), and focus on how fandom contributes to fans’ identities (157).

Referencing Donald Winnicott, Herbert Marcuse, and others, Sandvoss suggests that fans use objects or texts (like books, television shows, or celebrities) for self-reflection, essentially fashioning them into mirrors. Fans both mimic and see themselves in such objects, which function as “narrative focal point[s] in the construction of life narratives and identities” (111). He explains that the intensity of the relationships fans have with fan objects elides the boundaries between self and object, making fan objects a part of fans’ selves. In the process, fans “superimpose attributes of the self, their beliefs and value systems and, ultimately, their sense of self on the object of fandom” (104). Thus, Sandvoss asserts that meanings are not located in fan objects, but are instead created through fans’ interactions with fan objects (108). The fact that fans bring their own meanings to fan objects helps to explain why such objects can exert profound influences: “It is, then, precisely because objects of fandom can be so radically appropriated by fans to service their own self-reflection, that they gain the ability to profoundly shape the fan” (112–13).

The need for studies that engage with Caughey’s and Sandvoss’s work is amplified by the relative dearth of media studies research that explores fans’ relationships with fan objects. Each of the studies we review below examines fan identification with celebrities and echoes Caughey’s and Sandvoss’s assertions that fan-celebrity relationships are important vehicles for self-reflection with the potential to exert great influence on fans’ attitudes and behaviors. For example, in her analysis of letters from and questionnaires completed by British female spectators of 1940s and 1950s Hollywood film stars, Jackie Stacey suggests that, instead of exploring unconscious processes through analysis of the film texts, scholarship should examine spectators’ conscious memories to develop a fuller account of spectator/star relationships. She describes both a range of identificatory fantasies taking place in the imagination and a set of practices taking place as cultural activities. Stacey argues the spectator/star relationships she observed “concern the interplay between self and ideal” (174). Benson Fraser and William Brown’s ethnography of Elvis impersonators and fans demonstrates that, when fans develop relationships with celebrities, they can also

adopt those celebrities' attitudes and values, resulting in personal and, possibly, social transformation. Fraser and Brown believe that fans' drive to develop relationships with celebrities is "based on the need to enhance self-esteem through identification with certain values" (190).

Similarly, Daniel Cavicchi's ethnography of Bruce Springsteen fans reveals that musical performance encourages a kind of "metathinking" that enables fans to reflect on themselves and their relative positions in the social world (188). References to personal identities were prominent in fans' discussions of their interest in Springsteen's music, suggesting that they used either music as a mirror to shape their self-awareness or as a photo album to explore changes in self-perception over time (135). Finally, Anthony Fung explores identification through a reception analysis of the popular and influential Chinese Cantopop diva Faye Wong. He suggests that, as an icon who symbolizes a rebellious Asian femininity, Wong enables her middle-class female fans to engage in gender politics by "resist[ing] their own pressures, confront[ing] social norms, and negat[ing] their expected family role models" (258). Although Wong's music and persona have had no perceptible impact on gender relations in China and Hong Kong, her followers have appropriated her nonconformist music and persona to create "a polysemic imaginary space from which fans can gain momentum" (261) for their individual struggles. Such studies demonstrate the value of studying fans' identification with their objects and signal that phenomena associated with music icons may be particularly rich sites for such exploration. Next, we explore the scholarship relevant to a concept that thoroughly frames fans' identification with Lady Gaga.

Monsters

As described above, Lady Gaga's fans use the moniker "Little Monsters" to distinguish themselves as devoted Gaga fans and to signify allegiance to "Mother Monster." The literature below outlines the ways scholarship on monstrosity has defined monsters and made sense of monsters' meanings in contemporary society. Specifically, monsters function as a means of highlighting human difference and become cultural constructs in times of societal instability. Although monstrosity scholarship tends to use classic literary and cinematic texts as its objects of analysis, more recent research examines monsters in contemporary texts. Stephen Asma argues that the term "monster" is negatively charged and has "slipped wholly into the derogatory" (15) in its contemporary usage. Indeed, David Gilmore suggests that, through the study of Western monstrosity, scholars have concluded that imaginary monsters are metaphorical representations of "human qualities that have to be repudiated, externalized, and defeated" (4) and that monster figures embody the threats to social life that society must overcome. Moreover, as Matthew Clasen points out, monsters are readily used in myths and stories because of the ways they represent danger and elicit fear (224).

Some monstrosity scholarship has examined the term “monster” by contextualizing it in the particular cultural climate in which it has been evoked. As Scott Poole suggests, particular historical and contextual periods have made monsters a necessary fixture in Western culture and allowed them to function as “symbols of deviance, objects of sympathy, and even images of erotic desire” (xiv). Although their function has varied throughout history, some scholars argue that monsters ultimately subvert the status quo. Timothy Beal, for instance, indicates that monsters are “personifications of *otherness within sameness* . . . they are threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things” (4, emphasis in original). Similarly, Jeffrey Cohen’s delineation of the tenets of monster theory suggests that monsters appear at times of cultural crisis and function in opposition to established binary modes of thinking (6). Monsters therefore suggest an alternative view of the world, but the social anxiety they cause makes them something that must be overcome or at least reconciled.

Physical, political, and ideological difference is another key feature in representations of the monstrous (Cohen 10). As Cohen notes, monsters in cultural myths and stories are created by amalgamating elements from groups marginalized through race, gender, sexuality, and cultural difference (11). Poole similarly suggests that monsters are born out of the “ideological effort to marginalize the weak and normalize the powerful” (xvi). In his examination of monsters and sexuality in horror films, Harry Benshoff illustrates how difference has historically been linked to monstrosity: “Some people have always considered *anything* that opposes or lies outside the ideological status quo intrinsically monstrous and unnatural The concepts ‘monster’ and ‘homosexual’ share many of the same semantic charges and arouse many of the same fears about sex and death” (2–3, emphasis in original).

Previous monstrosity scholarship has analyzed a range of classic literary and cinematic texts, including a wide body of work on monster narratives such as *Frankenstein* and *Beowulf* (e.g. Hirsch; Waterhouse). Scholars are also beginning to turn to more contemporary texts that use monsters to reflect the anxieties of our current cultural milieu. For example, Joshua Tyree contends that HBO’s vampire series *True Blood* addresses a contemporary preoccupation with transgressive sexuality (32), and Kyle Bishop suggests that apocalyptic fear in post-9/11 America has encouraged the current proliferation of zombie texts (24). In sum, scholarship on monsters and the monstrous reveals that monsters tend to transgress social norms and their particular iterations are framed by the cultures from which they emerge. These findings offer perspective to our analysis of Lady Gaga’s fan community, giving necessary context for understanding how and why fans have rearticulated “monster” as a term of unity and pride. In the following section, we explore scholarship about social media, the primary sites through which fans express their monster identities and strengthen their connections to Lady Gaga.

Social Media, Celebrity, and Fans

Research on new media has explored the ways celebrities use social media to heighten a sense of intimacy and offer greater possibilities for interaction. Social media have changed fans' expectations of celebrity behavior, and thus fans now expect celebrities to interact with them and maintain ongoing affiliations with them (Marwick and boyd 156). Embracing this new need to engage with fans in social media, many contemporary celebrities work to maintain and advance their relationships by sharing personal information and communicating with fans online (Marshall 43).

Much research on celebrity-fan interactions online explores the ways social media can create a sense of intimacy and authenticity. Drawing from Erving Goffman, Elizabeth Ellcessor asserts that social media heighten "perceived access to private, backstage behavior" (47) and thus create a greater sense of intimacy. Through social media, celebrities create a sense of intimacy by sharing what appears to be personal information with fans, using language and cultural references to increase affiliation, and publicly acknowledging fans and their creative works (Marshall 40; Marwick and boyd 139). Alice Marwick and danah boyd suggest that the seeming lack of media gatekeepers, such as publicists, heightens this intimacy and frames online interactions as authentic (51). As Anne Petersen asserts, this "aura of 'realness'" makes celebrities seem more accessible, approachable, and likable, and juxtaposes their ordinary personalities with their "extraordinary talent, beauty, or skill." In the new media environment, it is therefore necessary to understand how the association between the highly regulated star image created by traditional media and the seemingly authentic "real" identity built up through contemporary social media might change fans' identification with celebrities (Ellcessor 52).

The increased potential for celebrity-fan interactions in social media allows fans additional opportunities to feel close to celebrities (Beer 232; Bennett; Burns 50; Ellcessor 52; Marwick and boyd 140; Muntean and Petersen). Marwick and boyd argue that, with Twitter in particular, "The fan's ability to engage in discussion with a famous person de-pathologizes the parasocial and recontextualizes it within a medium that the follower may use to talk to real-life acquaintances" (148). Thus, they suggest that, by giving fans the impression that they are communicating with celebrities through a familiar and personal medium, Twitter "creates a new expectation of intimacy" (156) between fans and celebrities. Similarly, Jeffrey Kassing and Jimmy Sanderson argue that celebrity and fan online interactions not only demonstrate, but, more importantly, transform parasocial relationships (185). Although online relationships and conversations between celebrities and fans remain mediated, fans increasingly experience them as real and authentic, reinforcing their feelings of truly "knowing" celebrities. Celebrities' reciprocity gives the illusion of two-way communication, which deepens fan-celebrity relationships in ways not possible through traditional media forms (Corrigan).

In total, research examining contemporary celebrities' use of social media points to the importance of interactive media in the creation of an expectation of

communication between fans and celebrities that feels both real and two-way. The heightened sense of closeness and familiarity created by two-way interaction and celebrities' online disclosure of personal information has blurred the boundaries that once separated "real" and "imaginary" (parasocial) relationships in traditional media. As we discuss below, Lady Gaga's unprecedented use of social media has directly impacted the relationships she and her fans have built and has heightened fans' identification as a result.

Taken together, research on fan identification, monsters and the monstrous, and celebrity-fan interaction in social media frame our analysis of Little Monsters' relationships with Lady Gaga. Our one-on-one interviews with self-described Little Monsters both contribute to and extend each of these areas of scholarship by offering a particularly robust example of fan identification with a fan object, demonstrating how "monster" can be re-appropriated as empowering and revealing how social media can deepen the connections between fans and celebrities. Before turning to our analysis of Lady Gaga fandom, we first discuss our method.

Method

Because we were interested in exploring how Little Monsters identified with and made sense of their relationships to Lady Gaga, we conducted one-on-one interviews with self-identified Little Monsters. With IRB approval, we recruited Little Monsters by posting a brief request with a Survey Monkey link to fan sites and blogs, including *Gaga Daily*, *Gaga Stigmata*, *Gaga Media*, and *DreamOfGaga*. We asked site administrators to post our interview request to their Twitter feeds and Facebook pages. The participants who followed our link were asked whether they identified as a Little Monster, and, if they did, they were asked about their demographics and Gaga-related media use. Respondents who indicated that they would be willing to participate in an interview were also asked to provide contact information.

Between January and March 2012, we conducted 45 interviews with self-identified Little Monsters from six continents. Our interest in recruiting an international sample meant that we conducted interviews past the point where we began receiving repetitive information (Corbin and Strauss). The interviews lasted between 15 and 90 minutes, and were conducted by phone or with software such as Skype, Google Chat, and Microsoft Messenger. Each was conducted in real time, either with audio or, when the participant preferred, video recording; the audio of each interview was recorded for transcription purposes. Three interviews were conducted in Korean and later translated into English. The remainder was conducted in English.

In the interviews with fans, participants were asked a range of questions, including what it meant to self-identify as a Little Monster, how they felt about Lady Gaga, how social media impacted their interest in and relationship to Lady Gaga, and their feelings about Lady Gaga's social activism. The interview participants were mostly white and mostly American, equally male and female, and equally gay and straight. They ranged in age from 14 to 53 (the mean was 21.67).¹ To preserve participants'

anonymity, we did not ask for their names and thus assigned each person a pseudonym to allow us to connect their demographics to their comments.

The interviews resulted in 294 single-spaced pages of verbatim transcripts. Each author participated in the verbatim transcription of the interviews and then in creating and applying a framework for coding the transcripts. Our research questions served as a guide as we coded the transcripts using the constant comparative method, which involves identifying emergent themes in the data (Cresswell 160). Below we discuss the most salient themes that emerged from our analysis.

Going Gaga

When we asked participants to tell us what being a Little Monster meant to them, most were quick to distinguish a Little Monster from a Lady Gaga fan in ways similar to Lawrence Grossberg's differentiation between the sensibilities of consumers and of fans. As we heard repeatedly, Little Monsters believe they are more engaged than lesser-invested Lady Gaga fans. For example, many participants insisted that Lady Gaga fans are primarily interested in Gaga's music, while Little Monsters explore all aspects of Lady Gaga's persona. The participants' distinctions parallel Grossberg's suggestion that the sensibility of "consumers" of cultural texts is a normative pleasure or enjoyment (55), while the sensibility of "fans" is a subcultural affect or "feeling of life" (56) that involves a greater investment and produces a deeper impact on identity. Corresponding to this distinction, Little Monsters separated themselves from mere consumers, who are, in this case Lady Gaga fans. As Jane (22, straight, German) said, Lady Gaga fans just "buy her CDs or . . . her records." Maria Elena (22, straight, American) shared a similar view: "I think that a Lady Gaga fan enjoys her music but doesn't read up on what's going on with all things Gaga as opposed to the Little Monsters who do."

Identification as a Little Monster, in comparison, moves beyond an interest in Lady Gaga's music. As many participants told us, a Little Monster is "obsessed," "hardcore," and "dedicated," and has made their interest in Lady Gaga "a way of life." Participants insisted that to be a Little Monster, one has to demonstrate that they are, as Salim (37, gay, Canadian) described, "fond of [Gaga] not only from a music perspective but also fond of her from her whole personality and whole cultural symbol." Chris (17, gay, American) further explained that "[a] Little Monster is a fan of her music and everything else that she does, including fashion, her other performances, her concerts, her activism." Cameron's (19, gay, Canadian) description of his connection to Lady Gaga is representative of many Little Monsters' orientations: "There really isn't a day when I'm not wondering what she's doing or when I don't talk about her, or when I don't listen to her music."

Many participants focused on one particularly salient characteristic of Little Monster identity: the acceptance and endorsement of Lady Gaga's messages of empowerment. They described Gaga's messages in a number of ways, stating, for instance, that she was chiefly concerned with "loving who you are, being who you are,"

being “generous” and “tolerant, accepting that others are ‘born this way,’” and avoiding being “judgmental.” As Hector (17, bisexual, Colombian) explained, a Little Monster is someone who “doesn’t judge or criticize what others are, regardless of their sexuality or skin color or other traits and stuff.” Jane indicated that “a real Little Monster follows the vision of Lady Gaga, the message . . . so, respect everything, everyone, and no judgments.” Selena (15, straight, American) insisted that activism is an important component of the Little Monster community: “fighting for equality for everyone and fighting to end bullying in schools is really a big focus.”

These descriptions suggest that Little Monsters have developed the same “intense admiration” that Caughey argues sets the stage for identification with a media figure (53). Further, Little Monsters’ willingness to embrace Lady Gaga’s messages of empowerment and equality hints at the possibility that, as Grossberg argues about fans who make affective investments, Lady Gaga could become a “surrogate voice” for Little Monsters and contribute to the organization of “their emotional and narrative lives and identities” (59). This is demonstrated more fully in the following section, where we explore the role the “monster” plays in the voices and identities Little Monsters develop through their connections to Lady Gaga.

Reclaiming “Monster”

That Little Monsters differentiate themselves from other fans based on the intensity of their investments may not be particularly surprising, but, given its normatively negative connotation, the name they have adopted to mark that difference, “monster,” is a bit unexpected. In this section, we describe how interview participants used the term “monster” in the context of their interest in Gaga, how they feel about their leader, “Mother Monster,” and what the Monster community means to them. In line with Cohen’s assertion that “the monster is best understood as an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category, and a resistant Other” (x), participants suggested that Little Monsters are individuals who are “outcasts,” “freaks,” “misfits,” “different,” or “unique.” Maria Elena noted that “most monsters are kind of weird . . . not ordinary” and Selena explained, “Most of us are pretty much the outcasts.” Chelsea (47, straight, American) clarified, “We’re all the ones that were not accepted in regular society, we weren’t the popular ones, we weren’t the good-looking ones, we weren’t the rich ones that had the best clothes.”

Other participants referenced a felt connection between “monster” and one’s inner demons or, as Cameron put it, one’s “dark side.” Jamila (15, lesbian, American) reflected, “Monster . . . to me it means the things that haunt us inside.” Jane suggested that difference and self-hate may be what haunts Little Monsters, “I think that most Little Monsters experience how self-hate feels and how people are hating on them because they are different in a way.” Salim emphasized that the use of “monster” encourages Little Monsters to embrace their differences, “[Gaga] wants people to be able to embrace their own demons, and so then ‘monster’ . . . is someone who can be comfortable with that part of their personality.”

In addition to connecting around an outcast status, several participants suggested that they were drawn to Lady Gaga's outspoken discussion about how those deemed different are often bullied, and by her candidness about her own experiences of being bullied. Jonathan (16, straight, British) noted that Lady Gaga is "very open about how she's been picked on and she's been rejected from society." Haylee (24, bisexual, American) affirmed: "Lady Gaga has shared her deepest and darkest stories in the portrayal of her music videos and has been that real person that we can all relate to in high school when we were all bullied."

Participants described the most salient characteristic of Lady Gaga's outspoken attitude as "fearlessness." Paige (24, queer, British), for example, shared, "I like that she's fearless, and I like that she is unapologetic about what she does." Jill (53, straight, American) also admired this aspect of Lady Gaga's persona: "I do love her behavior, her attitude, I love her freedom, I love the power that she's given herself." Brittany (19, straight, American) agreed: "What I like about her is she doesn't try to fit with society's norms and doesn't care what people think about her. She just presents herself in a way that she thinks is cool or interesting or innovative, regardless of backlash or what people are going to think." Selena emphasized that Gaga follows her instincts regardless of what others think: "She stands up for what she believes in no matter what anybody else thinks; no matter the cost, she's going to be there fighting for what she thinks is right. . . . She doesn't give up, and I think that's really admirable."

Through their involvement with the community built around Lady Gaga, Little Monsters have reappropriated the term "monster" by re-articulating its outsider status to inner strength and originality. No longer a negative label suggesting an inferiority to the norm, "monster" becomes, through its association with Lady Gaga, a positive point of identification for followers who wish to celebrate their differences and find strength through association with other monsters, including Lady Gaga. Gi-bum (14, bisexual, Korean), for instance, indicated that Lady Gaga's use of the term "monster" is "a positive way to express herself . . . she's a different kind of monster, not a bad monster but good one." Sarah (19, straight, American) suggested, "Monsters [are] always the villain of the story. Here, it's the hero." Moreover, identifying as a Little Monster allows participants to embrace the aspects of themselves often considered "weird," and a number of participants stated that the Little Monster label let them feel like they could "be themselves." Carole (19, straight, American) noted that identifying as a Little Monster has allowed her to "feel like I can be whatever I want to be without anyone judging," and Megan (19, straight, American) stated that watching Lady Gaga's performances has given her "so much self-confidence." Gaga's "fearlessness" models a strong sense of self for Little Monsters, encouraging them to value their originality. Thus, their self-identification as monsters reflects their outcast status, and, much like the David Bowie fans interviewed by Nick Stevenson, Little Monsters use Gaga to rework this outsider status to uplift and empower those excluded from the mainstream. Lady Gaga's "fearlessness" models a strong sense of self for Little Monsters, encouraging them to value their originality. We explore additional significant characteristics of Lady Gaga's persona below.

Monster Mother

Lady Gaga's bold embrace of difference, self-identification as a monster, and willingness to give voice to her fans' experiences are key aspects of Little Monsters' connection to her. These features of Little Monsters' investments in Lady Gaga are characterized in the name many use to address the creator and center of their community, "Mother Monster." In this section, we explore the social relationship through which Little Monsters identify with Lady Gaga: as a mother figure. Specifically, we consider how monsters build a social relationship with Gaga by placing her in this familiar social role, a role that enables Little Monsters to use Gaga to heal their psychological wounds, rework their inner selves, and make peace with the aspects of themselves that society has rejected. The strength of participants' bonds with Mother Monster demonstrates Caughey's assertion that fan objects "have qualities that the person senses in himself but desires to develop further" (54).

Participants described the origins of the Mother Monster/Little Monster relationship with reference to the title of Lady Gaga's 2009 EP, *The Fame Monster*, a number of media interviews with her, general fan lore, and the hand gestures in her "Bad Romance" video (moves that have come to be fans' bodily responses to her command at live shows, "Paws Up"). Alex's (14, bisexual, American) description is representative: "She just started calling us 'Little Monsters' and we started doing the 'paws up.' And I think then sometime after that we started calling her 'Mother Monster.'" Maria Elena also described, "I remember having heard an interview or seen an interview with her where she said that she called her fans 'Little Monsters'. And her Little Monsters decided to name her 'Mother Monster' because she's the one that pretty much . . . 'birthed' the Little Monster fan base."

In line with Caughey's assertion that "many fans attempt to explain their attachment by specifying an actual social relationship whose emotional quality is similar to that which they feel to the star" (40), many participants described their connection to Lady Gaga through familiar social roles like mother, leader, and mentor. Describing Lady Gaga as a mother figure, Hector insisted, "She cares about us. She looks after us. And I think she makes sure that we're fine and we're okay." June-hyun (16, bisexual, Korean), like many fans, described Lady Gaga as a mother, "who heals [Little Monsters'] scars and takes care of them." Jill elaborated on this point: "She's able to give them confidence and nurture them and make them feel strong and safe by [saying], 'This is who you are. My Little Monsters, it's who you are, be yourself.'"

Some Little Monsters recounted that Lady Gaga literally took on a kind of parental role in their lives. Rio (17, gay, American), for instance, felt Lady Gaga functioned as a mother when his family was not around, "When I feel like my family's not there for me, I always feel like [Gaga's] there for me with her music or just being there in an interview, it just makes me feel accepted." Jamila also said, "I never really had a close connection to my dad . . . it's like when I'm listening to [Gaga's] music she's telling

me it's going to be okay, you know? 'You're going to be fine. And you're going to get out of this.' And I just feel like she's mothering me sometimes."

Other participants interpreted "Mother Monster" to mean that Lady Gaga is the fan community's leader and a protective mentor. Francesca (19, straight, Dutch), for example, referred to Lady Gaga as "the mother of the community." Brittany believes that calling Lady Gaga "Mother Monster" makes "people feel like they belong somewhere. . . . It gives fans an identity and she's the leader." Jennifer (15, lesbian, American) described Lady Gaga as "that voice that we don't have. . . . She says what we can't."

For many fans, this protector role is based upon a shared experience of being outcasts in society. Selena stressed that Lady Gaga has "given everyone kind of a sense of strength to be able to say, 'This is what I think and this is why I think this way.' I think it really is an important part because she just cares about it all when before nobody really did or really talked about it." Rio further explained, "I think that she calls herself 'Mother Monster' because . . . she felt like a freak . . . so she has that certain connection to us that she's like, 'Alright, I'm more mature than you . . . so I'm gonna be your voice, I'm gonna be your mother.'" Chelsea sees Lady Gaga as Mother Monster because "she knows people are hanging on. And she feels a responsibility for the words that she says to these kids. I mean, there's kids out there committing suicide, so she's the Mother Monster . . . she inspires everybody."

Beyond the variety of specific descriptions participants gave of their relationships with Lady Gaga, their reflections on their feelings about the meaning she has in their lives reveal that they use her, as Sandvoss suggests about fans generally, as "a form of self-projection and reflection" (107). Specifically, the participants articulated a desire to have their worth affirmed, and to take on Lady Gaga's strengths to overcome challenges stemming from their own difference and marginalization. In line with Sandvoss's assertion that fan objects function as mirrors, Little Monsters' relationships with Mother Monster support the idea that "engagement with the object of fandom constitutes an interaction with fans' own vision of self" (159).

Further, the participants' stories suggest that, in addition to functioning as a mirror that enables them to work through difficult emotions and experiences, Little Monsters' self-identities and points of view are transformed by the messages received through their investments in Lady Gaga. The relationships that Little Monsters have built with Lady Gaga are especially useful to those who have been marginalized or bullied; through moving examples these Monsters shared how Mother Monster has given them the support and strength necessary to accept and love themselves. Andy (19, gay, American) shared that his experience with Lady Gaga at a concert changed the way he thought about himself:

I identify as gay and . . . I was closeted before . . . the first Monster Ball, and then there was a whole like, 'you're born this way' . . . and it was one of those experiences where it's like, I have a good support system, I have friends . . . and that's really what got the ball rolling with telling more and more people [about my sexual identity].

In one particularly powerful interview, Jane disclosed, “I was bullied in school . . . I had a serious eating disorder. I really feel more self-confident as a Little Monster . . . and I really learned to love myself and to think I am beautiful the way I am.” Similarly, Tim (18, straight, American), a Little Monster whose school classmates taunted and called him “a fat gay boy,” shared how his relationship with Lady Gaga literally saved his life:

She said to find your inner fame and never let anyone take that inner fame away from you. That really instilled sort of this strength that I never knew I had inside of me . . . I was probably about a month away from committing suicide . . . I was setting a date . . . but after reading about stuff and seeing what she said, it really just made me feel like I did have a reason to live. And that’s how she saved my life.

In line with Caughey’s assertions that “imaginary relationships” can have positive, important individual and social consequences (69), interview participants revealed how their deep investments in Lady Gaga have exerted a powerful influence on them, in some cases literally saving their lives. Their candid comments demonstrate that Gaga’s identification as a monster and her reclamation of the term through her music and persona allow them to see themselves through her perspective and learn to value their differences, essentially making Lady Gaga “a narrative focal point in the construction of life narratives and identities” (Sandvoss 111). Further, as Sandvoss suggests, the profundity of the relationship’s impact says less about Lady Gaga’s influence than it does about what fans need from Lady Gaga (105). In the next section, we explore a factor we believe contributes to the depth of the connection between Little Monsters and Lady Gaga, and question whether there is actually anything imaginary in the relationship.

Social Media and Reciprocity

It was immediately clear in our discussions with the interview participants that social media, particularly Twitter, play an important role in the relationships Little Monsters have developed with Mother Monster. Unlike the “imaginary relationships” Caughey describes, the Little Monsters we interviewed described a relationship in which they felt they received direct and regular feedback from their fan object, Lady Gaga. In this section, we explore the impact of social media on the relationships developed between Little Monsters and Lady Gaga, and consider its effects on the fan/fan-object relationship generally.

Little Monsters conveyed that Lady Gaga encouraged them to see her as a mother figure through expressions of affection fans feel she shows them in social media. Jin (15, bisexual, American) insisted, “There’s no doubt that she loves us to death. She said she would do anything for us. . . . She really, really cares about us.” Jane maintained, “She always says that what we have is eternal, something that lasts forever no matter what happens, and that she will always fight for us.” Megan said similarly, “She’s always so kind when people meet her and she’s just so giving and she tries to

acknowledge her fans on Twitter, post their covers [of her songs] and says ‘this is great,’ or posts their artwork and says how it’s beautiful. . . . I think the fact that she goes out of her way to do that is remarkable.” These comments suggest that the felt reciprocity of the relationship is a key component of Little Monsters’ identification with Lady Gaga and that social media encourage and facilitate the give-and-take between Mother and Little Monsters.

Referring to Lady Gaga’s record number of Twitter followers (more than 37 million in May 2013), participants frequently described Lady Gaga as “the queen of Twitter,” and “the most followed person on Twitter.” Monsters, like Jill, argued that Gaga’s use of social media contributes to her success: “One of the huge reasons that she is so popular is because she is available to so many social networks.” Hector similarly suggested that social media have been “really helpful for [Lady Gaga’s] career to take off and to get her message further out.” Chelsea insisted, “I don’t believe she would be as popular as she is today if it wasn’t for social media.” Thus, Monsters believe that Lady Gaga’s active use of social media is not merely one aspect of her career, but has instead been integral in establishing her as an artist who connects with her fans.

Though she may be the most followed person on Twitter, Lady Gaga is certainly not the only celebrity using social media. Many Little Monsters expressed that the particular ways Gaga uses social media to communicate were different from other public figures’ use of social media. For example, participants praised Gaga for her refusal to use social media to promote her records or performances, or, as Jennifer articulated, for “not us[ing] social media for money.” Eric (14, gay, American) stressed that Lady Gaga’s social media use differs because it is fan-directed: “Other stars might use it regularly, just putting out a video or something else. Gaga actually communicates with her fans.” In line with Marwick and boyd’s assertion that a specific attribute of Twitter is this “sense that the reader is seeing the real, authentic person behind the ‘celebrity’” (149), Little Monsters also appreciated that Gaga uses social media herself, without a publicist. Cameron, for instance, suggested that Gaga is one of the few artists who “actually tweets herself without letting her PR team tweet for her.” The authenticity of Lady Gaga’s voice was also important to Debbie (28, bisexual, American), who asserted, “You can tell that with her Twitter, she definitely writes it. It’s not someone else writing it for her. So, I think it adds to the authenticity of everything that she says and . . . you know it’s her.”

Little Monsters value what they perceive to be Lady Gaga’s authentic voice in social media and believe that she uses it as a platform to speak directly to them. This perception is enhanced by the symbiotic affiliation between the perceived authenticity of Gaga’s tweets and the proprietary information she shares, including mundane details about her daily life and private disclosures reserved for her most loyal followers. For example, Rio observed, “I think she shares most of her life, like glimpses into what she’s doing because that’s the greatest disconnect we feel from her, that we’re not there with her all the time.” Hector agreed that Lady Gaga uses social media to give fans a glimpse into her daily life, “She shares things about her regular life, things that

are about the things that are coming up, her albums, or anything else. . . . Things that you know from a friend or something. Normal things.”

Tim, on the other hand, insisted that Lady Gaga “posts cooler and more interesting stuff” for Little Monsters, such as images of items her fans make for her that otherwise would not be shared. Haylee similarly described her interest in the information Lady Gaga posts for Little Monsters, “Lady Gaga always says we can sniff her out because by her tweets we know exactly where she is and what street she’s on. If she puts a photo up of her in Detroit, we know exactly where she is and what hotel she’s at.” Because fans believe Lady Gaga uses Twitter primarily to communicate with them instead of just publicizing her products, and because she shares information to which fans would not otherwise have access, her tweets encourage Little Monsters to deepen their identification because they feel like they really know her.

In addition to intensifying their connections with Lady Gaga, interviewees suggested that their communication with her through social media feels direct and unmediated. Debbie, for example, shared, “It’s almost kind of like you’re talking to her. Almost directly, which is really crazy. And sometimes she tweets people back and . . . people go absolutely nuts.” Jane agreed with Lady Gaga’s assessment of her own media use, “She says that people say it is like her text messaging to all of us,” and stressed that “I’m always really happy to see a new message from her.” Jamila commented on the impact of Lady Gaga’s responses to fans on Twitter, “When one Little Monster tweets [Gaga] and she tweets them back, that Monster represents us as a whole and it means the world.” Thus, even though Lady Gaga, like many celebrities on Twitter, follows far fewer people than the number who follow her (Marshall 43), any reply or comment she makes to one fan essentially serves as a proxy for all of the Little Monsters who follow her. In other words, Lady Gaga need not reply directly to each fan for them to feel as though she is talking to them.

Many participants underscored the importance of Gaga’s information sharing and direct contact through social media in the relationships they have with her. Carole noted, “[Without Twitter] I would never get to know anything about her unless she was on TV.” Dylan (19, straight, American) showed his appreciation of her social media use: “And thank goodness for [social media], or else we wouldn’t know half the stuff we know about her!” These comments underscore findings that “fans who choose to follow their favorite stars are being exposed to elements of their personality that may have previously seemed out of reach” (Bennett). Further, the perception that Gaga actively communicates with her fans through social media, either by directly talking to them or by hinting at her knowledge and appreciation of their presence, encourages Little Monsters to feel like they have developed a “real” relationship with her.

Because Lady Gaga shares a range of personal and insider information with Little Monsters through social media, many Monsters developed feelings of intimacy with Lady Gaga, suggesting that social media both facilitate and enrich communication between Lady Gaga and Little Monsters. Monsters like Gi-bum stressed how social media make the relationship between Gaga and her fans “much stronger.” He

explained, “Because she always shares her daily life with her fans through social media, we feel more intimate with her. We feel like we know her better. If you just learn about her from news or mass media, you feel this distance from her.” In discussing fans’ general relationships with celebrities, Jessica (23, bisexual, American) argued that celebrities who have a lesser presence in social media “seem larger than life, you cannot touch them, you just have impersonal relationship with this artist based on how you feel about them or how you think they are.” She believes Gaga’s use of social media changes this: “She helps create that sort of relationship with her Little Monsters, and she keeps it consistent. And she’s always getting on Twitter and updating and responding. So we’re sort of special in a way.”

Little Monsters’ comments reveal that Lady Gaga’s social media use helps form, negotiate, and strengthen the relationships that her fans have with her, potentially obscuring the “imaginary” (parasocial) component of the fan-celebrity relationship. Salim argued that Lady Gaga’s use of social media to communicate with her fans is groundbreaking: “She will always be known as someone who has overhauled the concept of fandom-stardom relationship. . . . [Social media] really has cemented and consolidated her fan base to a great extent.” Illustrating Salim’s point, Brittany argued that Gaga’s social media use “keeps the connection. It makes her fans feel like they’re close to her and they’re sort of involved in her life. It makes her seem more real.” Tim similarly praised Gaga’s use of social media, “I think it keeps us closer together. It keeps the Little Monsters up to date. . . . Through social media, she’s still able to communicate with us and keep that close bond that we all have with her.” The participants’ comments illustrate that social media have indeed impacted the fan-celebrity relationship, moving it from the realm of “imaginary” to a new, more “real” and immediate form. Unlike generations of fans before them, Little Monsters have the opportunity to feel engaged in regular and repeated contact with Lady Gaga. Because they feel that she reciprocates, the connection is maintained and extended, allowing them to identify with Mother Monster at a level that is unimaginable in Caughey’s conceptualization. In our conclusion, we explore the implications of social media for the process of identification.

Conclusion

Since her arrival on the popular music scene in 2008, Lady Gaga has exerted an unmistakable force on popular culture in the realms of music, fashion, performance, and social activism, to name a few. Her record-breaking presence in social media has helped to cultivate an innovative reciprocal bond with Little Monsters that has impacted the nature of fan-celebrity relationships. As “Mother,” Gaga rearticulates the negative connotations of “monster” to encourage and empower her fans, enabling them to use her to reflect upon their own self-identities, to build self-confidence, and to embrace their differences from mainstream culture.

Our one-on-one interviews allowed us to explore fans’ characterizations of their relationships with Lady Gaga, revealing that in this instance identification, monster

identity, and social media work symbiotically to create a fan-celebrity connection like no other. The complex ways that Little Monsters relate to Lady Gaga contribute to the relatively small body of scholarship on fan identification with star objects. The impact of Lady Gaga's cultural messages on Little Monsters also suggests that there is much more work to be done in this under-studied area. Little Monsters demonstrate, as Caughey argues, that despite repeated attempts to position fan activity as pathological, fandom can yield important prosocial benefits. Our participants indicated that a connection to Lady Gaga has helped them survive the regular bullying and marginalization that they have experienced and endured because they were seen as different.

Because it is such an important component of Little Monsters' identification with her, Lady Gaga's fearless re-articulation of the term "monster" enables an exploration of monster theory in the context of the fan-celebrity relationship. By embracing a range of qualities normative culture has rejected, Lady Gaga and the fan community built around her reconfigure "monster" as a term of empowerment, and send important and influential cultural messages about the value and pleasure of difference. No doubt shaped by the current cultural preoccupation with other monsters like zombies and vampires, Gaga's messages are especially poignant in a social context where school bullying and homophobia persist and where suicide is one of the three main causes of death in teenagers ("Suicide Facts").

Social media both enable and amplify Little Monsters' deep identification with Lady Gaga. The reciprocity they feel from Gaga challenges previous knowledge about fan-celebrity relationships by raising questions about the characteristics of and distinctions between "imaginary" and "real" relationships. Twitter and Facebook enable fans to become more involved and invested in celebrities' lives, yet even the most "authentic," intimate, and reciprocal communication that fans have with celebrities online is mediated and is constructed. Future research must begin to develop a framework for understanding how celebrities' reciprocity with fans impacts what we know about fans' connections with their fan objects. As social media continue to enable and deepen the interactivity possible in the fan-celebrity relationship, new characteristics of the relationship are likely to evolve, making it more important than ever to understand how relationships with objects contribute to fans' identities and what impact they have socially and culturally.

Note

- [1] The specific demographics of our interview sample are as follows: *sex*: 21 female, 22 male, 1 transgender, 1 genderqueer; *sexual identity*: 11 bisexual, 12 gay or lesbian, 21 heterosexual, 1 queer; *race*: 6 Asian or Asian American, 1 Black, 5 Latino/a, 1 Middle Eastern, 2 Multiracial, 30 White; *nationality*: 31 American, 1 Australian, 2 British, 2 Canadian, 1 Colombian, 1 Dutch, 1 German, 1 Greek, 1 Kazakhstani, 3 Korean, 1 Namibian.

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Notes on Contributors

Melissa A. Click is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri.

Hyunji Lee is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri.

Holly Willson Holladay is a doctoral student in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri.

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